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WRT-105 “Reassigning Meaning” Summary

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In today’s society, there are many people who live with disabilities, whether they are physical, mental, emotional, psychological or medical. In Simi Linton’s “Reassigning Meaning,” she discusses many overarching topics related to disabilities and the related oppression. There is quite a bit of oppression and many of these individuals have unique life experiences. “Albeism” is a term used to describe discrimination in favor of the able bodied. It also means that someone’s life is evaluated by his or her disabilities. Linton proposes that oppression against disabled people is not as easily understood as racism of sexism per se. Some collective nouns for these groups of people are “cripples” or “handicapped,” which both have negative connotations.

Linton describes how it is very clear that a disability can create an identity, which can easily spur discrimination. Often, many types of disabled people are grouped into one identity. But the degree of someone’s impairment is also important. There is a social distinction that can be created, which Linton described as a “marginalized status.”

“Physically challenged” is one of a group of phrases that has seems to have caught on in today’s society. There are many uses of the word “challenged” and “special” to suffice for “disabled” or “handicapped.” Linton presents the idea that the term “special” may be a deliberate reaction formation. Some other words such as “cripple” only retain their value because they are used in jokes and informal conversations. “Overcoming a disability” is a common phrase for simple surpassing the social limitations that a disability creates. Linton then brings up a major point. She speaks about how people will often compliment someone else’s feat, but at the same time unintentionally imply a discredit to that person, their race, or anything about them. Linton moves on to bring up a point called “passing,” which is when someone with a disability can conceal it well enough to avoid social pressure or ostracism. This concept does not only apply to handicapped people. Gays and lesbians as well as those who are racially mixed can “pass” for being one type or another.

The discussion then moves to the border between normality and abnormality. Obviously, those who are not deemed normal feel devalued, but Linton presents a few interesting examples that question discrimination against the abnormal. Towards the end of the passage, Linton makes an effort to enforce that living with a disability is not always so painful and wants the amount of suffering to be accurately described by others.

At the end of the work, Linton finally discusses the Latin roots of the prefix “dis” in disabled. She slightly recapitulates some basic assertions and quickly wraps up the fact that the thoughts of the disabled remain central in the book.

Linton, Simi. “Reassigning Meaning.” *The Disabilities Studies*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. Third ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 1997. 223-236. Print.